

A READJUSTMENT OF PRIORITIES

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by Penny Lee

Sarah's air of gloom and despondency had been deepening for weeks.

At first, she ascribed it to monthly blues, then the phase of the moon, and even the prolonged spell of cloud and rain that had blighted the last two weeks of May.

Underneath it all, she knew the true reason she was so depressed, why life seemed so pointless at the moment. But she dare not admit it, even to herself. It was ridiculous. Worse than that, it was immoral—many would say perverted, disgusting, unnatural.

The cause was an eleven-year-old girl named Devi. Or more specifically, the fact that in a few short weeks, Devi would be ending her time at St Cuthbert's Church of England Primary School, moving on after the summer holidays to the big, impersonal high school at the other side of the borough. And out of Sarah's life.

For the past two years, after lunch on a Wednesday, Sarah had left her desk in the fancy City law firm and walked the half-mile to the local school. Her employers participated in a borough-wide scheme to grant volunteers a paid hour off, to help out in local schools, mentoring children with learning difficulties, helping out in computer classes, or as in Sarah's case, spending a quiet hour being read to by a succession of kids. Initially, she just felt good about it—she was giving a little back to the community, but after a couple of terms, she found herself hurrying her sandwich, eager to head off to the cramped old Victorian school, excited to catch up with her regular little clients.

They were of varying ability and enthusiasm, but like nine-year-olds do, the kids of Year 5 all enjoyed their few minutes being the centre of attraction, having a grown-up's undivided attention and the chance to show off improvement in their own reading ability.

Devi was a couple of reading stages behind most of the others in her class, yet when Sarah could persuade her to settle down and look at her book properly, and stop letting her attention wander towards all the distractions passing by in the busy corridor, the small, lightly-built young girl would sit stock still on the tiny plastic chair next to her, and her eyes would narrow in concentration. As she read the words, slowly and deliberately, her fine, pale brown lips would form the syllables, and she would speak so softly and quietly that Sarah would have to lean down to listen. And when she had finished a few pages, and Sarah had given her some praise and encouragement, Devi's mouth would form a wide smile, showing off her great big white teeth and her eyes would sparkle with pleasure.

As the weeks passed, Sarah noticed that she spent longer with Devi than the other children who read to her. She made a special effort with her, and shared the little girl's thrill when they had had a good session. The volunteer readers were bound by many rules and guidelines, all of which discouraged anything more than a rather clinical and detached relationship. Adult readers were vetted in advance

and briefed not to discuss family matters, or chat unnecessarily, and of course, the reading had to take place in the most public part of school, to avoid the risk of any inappropriate behaviour.

With Devi, Sarah deliberately broke the rules. After reading, she always asked the girl a little about her home life. The child's uniform was shabby, and her blouse rarely ironed, and Sarah suspected that she came from a broken home. She wore the same scuffed shoes all year round, and her shoulder-length black hair had a crooked parting and was never brushed quite thoroughly to remove the matting at the ends.

Over the summer term, Sarah's curiosity grew and each week she prized out another nugget of information and she realised that the poor girl had a fairly wretched home life, spending much of her time farmed out to relatives, so that in the course of a week she often stayed in three different flats around the inner city. As their bond strengthened, Devi confided more and more about her uncaring mother and absent father, and Sarah's soul writhed at her young friend's inner sadness.

So when she felt the glow of the small girl's pride as she completed a new, harder book or succeeded in teasing a little chuckle from her, Sarah's joy was boundless.

It was in complete contrast to work, which formed the greater part of Sarah's narrow world. At thirty, she was a plain, unmarried workaholic and when she came back from school and gushed to her colleagues about the progress of 'her' kids, they teased her about being broody and behind her back they expounded all manner of theories about the shy, hard-working commercial lawyer who rarely joined in the social scene out of hours and who obviously needed to a. get a life; b. get laid more often; or c. find a husband and start a family.

A few more perceptive people in the office read more significance into the conservative way Sarah dressed and her sparing use of makeup and her reticence to join them for a drink and a club after work, and suspected the truth. Though nothing was ever said publicly. She knew they talked about her behind her back, even overheard the word 'closet' on a couple of occasions, but she didn't give a damn that they didn't know even the half of it.

On the last Wednesday of the summer term, as Devi was about to return to class after reading, Sarah pulled a sheaf of paper from her bag and passed it across.

The little girl's smooth brown brow furrowed and Sarah hastily explained that she had written the thin homemade book herself, just for Devi, to read during the holidays. Within, Sarah had penned her own story and used pictures painstakingly culled from the internet to illustrate it. A happy story, about a little girl also called Devi, who had an exciting adventure at the seaside and lived happily ever after.

She didn't add that it had taken her two solid weeks of evenings to complete.

Devi seemed bemused. She politely offered her thanks, but she was clearly unused to receiving unsolicited gifts. Sarah broke another rule. She squeezed the girl's soft brown arm in reassurance.

Often during the summer, as she sat out in the park with her lunchtime salad or sat in silence on the prom with Mother dozing in the wheelchair beside her, Sarah's thoughts turned to the quiet, enigmatic

little Indian girl back in the city. What sort of holiday would she be having? Had she read the book? Was anyone making her laugh?

Sarah made sure she was rostered to read with Year 6 that September.

And when the new form teacher asked who wanted to be first to read, it was Devi's arm that beat the others into the air. She took up more than half of Sarah's hour, insisting that she read her entire book. Faced with such an unprecedented and spontaneous display of enthusiasm, Sarah simply sat back and enjoyed it. Engrossed in her story, Devi had no inkling that her grown-up friend was watching her so closely, examining every subtle change in expression, taking in the slightness of her body, the warm shade of her skin.

And was aching to take her into her arms.

Sarah created two more books, continuing the adventures of the fictional Devi, the second of which was posted to the girl's home address inside a card for her eleventh birthday, an act which trampled unapologetically across any number of rules in the volunteers' code of conduct. Each time, the pretty little girl giggled helplessly with pleasure at seeing her own name in print.

Then one afternoon before Easter, when Devi sat down beside her and opened her latest book, Sarah looked down and was taken aback to see her own name, written rather shakily in gold ink and framed with a ring of glued-on sparkle. Beaming so widely her face was in danger of splitting open, Devi handed a crumpled sheet of paper to her, folded in half and covered in neat rows of tight handwriting.

"I wrote a story for you," laughed Devi, elated to have pulled off such a complete surprise.

Sarah had to pull the paper sharply aside, back in the privacy of her office, or else her cascading tears might have smudged the ink.

She could not read it to the end for the third time. Sarah had to go over to the window and catch her breath. Pull herself together and stop being so ruddy foolish. Her semi-transparent reflection half-smiled, half-wept back at her and scorned her weakness.

She turned away and surveyed her cramped office, looking critically at the shelves of references works and precedents, and the unruly columns of files and papers lining the walls. The desk around Devi's story was piled precariously high, almost concealing the personal computer. Then she realised that in the whole of that busy room, there was just one article that actually belonged to her. Personally. A single framed photograph, of Mother before the stroke, pushed so far back by the tedious heaps of legal paperwork that it seemed about to launch itself off the edge.

Sarah picked up the story once again and recalled the delight on Devi's beautiful, open little face. The way her soft cheeks piled up. The cutest tiny dimple beneath her lower lip. Nobody else in her life smiled so easily, so genuinely, when she met them. No-one had ever written a story for her, either.

The office summed up her life—dominated by the unending passage of work across her desk, with the constant duty of caring for Mother always lurking on the sideline, never completely out of mind.

And then there was Devi. Small, vulnerable, gorgeous Devi. Her weekly escape. Her few minutes of delight, when nothing else mattered. When her stomach knotted, and she had to clench her thighs to drive away the yearning sensations that she should not be feeling and concentrate so deeply on the reading in order to banish the forbidden fantasies she should not be thinking.

Now, all too soon, she would be deprived of even that glorious denial. Year 6 would be moving on. There are other kids, for sure, and next year she would undoubtedly make friends with a new class. But none would be as special. None would ever light up her world like Devi.

The final Wednesday arrived. Sarah walked to the school early and was pleased that the weather was good, for it meant she could take her pair of chairs out into the playground and read in the shade of the ragged old rowan tree by the back gate. The children were already lined up after the bell, waiting to be let back into school for the start of afternoon lessons. Sarah arranged the chairs and looked up. At the back of the tallest line of kids, a small dark girl turned and waved, her brilliant smile flashing. Sarah felt a throbbing dryness in her throat; she waved back, biting her lip and cursing her silliness, for she could feel the unwanted tears welling up.

A few minutes later, Devi dashed out into the yard, clutching her final reading book.

Sarah let her work steadily through a couple of pages. There was no longer any problem with the small girl's concentration, and she had reached Stage 14 in her reading, which was average for a ten-year-old about to leave Junior School. Devi's progress, her developing enjoyment of books—it was very much thanks to Sarah, with her gentle praise and infectious cheerfulness. Together they had found Devi's self-confidence and at the same time, the lawyer had perfected her own mask of inspirational cheerfulness, behind which remained successfully hidden the screaming torment of her mangled emotions.

Then Sarah touched the girl's knee. The guilty tightness gripped her stomach. Another rule broken.

Devi stopped reading and lowered her book.

Sarah was staring at her, and so she smiled, her large brown eyes sparkling between the wonderful curls of her long, dark eyelashes. Neither spoke. The small bemused girl frowned slightly, but as she studied her grown-up friend's earnest face, and felt the intensity of her adoration, she seemed to relax, as if she had received and understood Sarah's inner thoughts. Under her book, now resting in her lap, she slipped her hand into Sarah's and their fingers laced together.



The city was sweltering in an unprecedented August heatwave.

He turned the aircon to max and returned to the desk. First thing this morning, the freelance lawyer hired to take over Sarah's caseload had groaned when he entered her office and took in the mountainous paperwork. But as he slowly worked his way from pile to pile, he was surprised, then rather impressed,

to find tucked into the top of each stack comprehensive notes, laboriously mapped out in dense longhand on sheets of closely-ruled notepaper.

Curiouser and curiouser, he thought, although he was grateful for the missing lawyer's diligence and forward-thinking—it would make his job a doddle. It was obvious to him that the woman had made a fully premeditated disappearance.

He took a break from studying Sarah's notes and looked around the office. There were no personal touches to be seen. It was none of his business, that she had simply failed to show up for work for the past fortnight, and had made no attempt to contact the firm. But he had the clear impression she would not be coming back.

A hundred miles away, in a genteel holiday resort on the Dorset coast, Sarah leaned back into the padded cushion on the sun lounger and squinted through her uncharacteristically pricey new sunglasses to watch the surf-boarders riding the waves. She and Mother had been coming to this clifftop hotel each year since she was a kid.

But the small, fragile hand she held this summer was not Mother's. At long last, after years of withering pain, which stripped her first of her vitality, and then her mind, the old lady had last month died quietly in her sleep. Sarah grieved, but it was a blessed release; for them both.

Her companion this summer was very different from the weak old lady wrapped up in her wheelchair. She wore the newest and whitest of trainers and the trendiest of short sun dresses from the Oxford Street outlet of a very expensive and fashionable manufacturer of children's designer wear. Her long, raven hair was glossy and someone had spent a long, long time lovingly weaving it into meticulous plaits after her morning bath.

When she looked up from her book—a pristine hardback copy of the latest Harry Potter—she would flash a dazzling smile at Sarah, who would squeeze her hand and grin conspiratorially in reply. Devi liked it on the hotel terrace—she could have an ice cream whenever she wanted and Sarah was right next to her, if she needed any help with a new or difficult word.

Tomorrow, Sarah would have to get organised. Work out the future properly.

But today was just for relaxing. For stretching out in the sun and reflecting on the electrifying euphoria of waking up that morning with a tiny, warm body tucked tight against her naked breasts.

She sat up and discreetly shifted the elastic of her new bikini briefs, where the tightness was becoming dangerously pleasurable. It seemed so strange, so wicked, to expose her body to the sun after so long in the shade with Mother. And she loved the way Devi would shoot sneaky glances in her direction when she thought Sarah was not looking.

She felt so light.

Everything that had been crushing her for so long had seemed to slip from her shoulders that moment Devi had come through the gate of the playground and kept her secret appointment with her special friend, and the two of them had set out together to escape their oppressive existences in the city.

Money presented no problem—she had enough squirrelled away to last for years, with even more to come from her Mother's estate. Earlier, she had posted the anonymous note they had written together, to reassure Devi's family that she was safe and sound and would want for nothing.

So there was no rush.

She turned on to her side and scrutinised once more the vision of loveliness beside her. The beautiful, intelligent, tender and immensely cuddlable young girl who so readily accepted her company and yielded so willingly when they embraced. Devi sensed the intensity of affection flooding over her and looked up from her reading. She registered the gleam in Sarah's eyes and the mischievous way her mouth had fallen slightly open and how her tongue crept slowly across to moisten her lips, and she knew what came next. Those peculiar butterflies of anticipation deep inside her tummy had flown back again, and as she moved her face closer to Sarah, she closed her eyes.

Funny—she always seemed to do that, when Sarah's loving lips caressed her own.

The End